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"Put on one side, some important proverb of Solomon, some pious moral, prudential or economical precept"

POOR RICHARD'S MOTTOES FOR COINS

By

ERIC P. NEWMAN, A.N.A. No. 4624

IF FRANKLIN'S desires could have been fulfilled the United States would have had a most unusual copper coinage. Its legends would have been hints to help American people improve themselves. His correspondence in planning such a coinage during the American Revolution has his usual spark of genius. It is well known that the motto "Time Flies So Mind Your Business" which is represented partly by word and partly by symbol on the Feb. 17, 1776 Continental currency fractional issues, the 1776 Continental currency coinage, and the 1787 Fugio cent is often attributed to Franklin, but there is no convincing evidence as to whose suggestion it actually was.

Beginning with the May 10, 1775 authorization, the Continental paper money contained reassuring patriotic thoughts in Latin and in allegoric symbols apparently suggested by Francis Hopkinson. The fractional notes of Feb. 17, 1776 were a radical change in that "Mind Your Business" was written in English for the public to understand. The design of the Continental coinage of 1776 was copied from the paper currency as was the 1787 copper coinage¹.

Franklin, in his Poor Richard's Almanac for 1748, used the motto "Lost Time is Never Found" and in his 1758 almanac "In a Corrupt Age the Putting the World in Order Would Breed Confusion; Then e'en

Mind Your Own Business." Franklin, being the fountainhead for the use of mottoes in America, can well be the direct or indirect source of the Fugio motto. William Barton, the nephew of David Rittenhouse, indicates that Rittenhouse, in 1756, made a clock for Thomas Barton (father of William Barton), containing the words "Tempus Fugit" and "Go About Your Business."² While either Franklin or Rittenhouse could readily have given consideration to the design on fractional Continental paper money it must be conceded that the thought predated both of them. Franklin's subsequent suggestions with respect to mottoes for United States coins make it clear that he was much interested in sponsoring mottoes everyone could understand.

On Dec. 13, 1775 the Continental Congress appointed Franklin to a treasury committee of five persons to prepare instructions for another committee to carry on during the contemplated Christmas recess. One of the instructions so prepared was "to expedite the striking monies ordered by the Congress to be struck." Since Congress did not recess the instructions were not necessary, but are evidence of the closeness of Franklin to treasury matters at the time of the adoption of the Fugio motto.

By Feb. 20, 1777 a report had been submitted to Congress calling for the establishment of a mint and

1. Eric P. Newman, "The 1776 Continental Currency Coinage," *Coin Collector's Journal*, July 1952, p. 3.

2. William Barton, *Memoirs of David Rittenhouse*, p. 46; Sylvester S. Crosby, *Early Coins of America*, p. 302.

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asking "that a quantity of Copper be purchased and coined into pence and half pence, each penny to weigh half an ounce avoirdupoise and be in value equal to one seventy-second part of a Dollar."³ In the Franklin papers in the American Philosophical Society library are a group of letters showing the development of plans for the copper coinage suggested by the congressional committee. Some of these letters were circuitously delivered between England and France because the state of war in America made it difficult for pro-American Englishmen to communicate with Americans in France.

Franklin was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary of the Court of France on Sept. 14, 1778 and became an active participant in the plan to provide copper coins for the United States. The earliest letter in his files is from Robert Finlay at Bordeaux, France, to Arthur Lee, United States Commissioner in Paris,⁴ which reads as follows:

Bordeaux the 2^d May 1779

Dear Sir

Conversing with Major Fraser this morning we came on the Subject of Coin & he seemed to think a Large quantity of Coppr Coin would be useful & necessary for the united Colonies. beg to know if you and your friends at Paris are of Same opinion, for on proper Conditions I could contract for the delivery of any quantity with such Stamp or Stamps as Should be thought proper on reasonable Terms—on which Subject Intend to Converse with Mr. Delap tomorrow whose assistance as a monied man may be necessary & if requisite I will travell to Paris to give all further Ilucidations necessary. Suppose 13 Ears of Corn bound together with the words vis unita fortior, round, for the one Side & Something proper on the Other. I congratulate you on great Success of your affairs and am with great Esteem

Dear Sir your most Obed^t. Servt.

R. Finlay

Edward Bridgen, a partner in the

firm of Bridgen and Waller, manufacturers of coins and tokens in London, was a friend of Benjamin Franklin and of the American cause. Bridgen had property in North Carolina and wrote to Franklin in Passy, France, on Sept. 17, 1779,⁵ as follows:

Dear Sir:

I have sent to the care of our good Monsieur Genet 2 Samples of Metal intended for the Current coin when they are doubtless much wanted and yield an immense profit to the Governmt.

I hereby engage to deliver at the port of London as fine in quality and of the same size and weight as those samples any quantity at 14 d Sterling p. pound weight - Package, Cartage and other Incidental expences to be paid by the purchaser. Peices of half the weight or double the weight may be had on the same terms and all of the best Copper. These peices are 1/3 of an ounce and may well pass for the same value as halfpence do in England. I beg to know your sentiments as soon as possible otherwise the proprietor *must* make his offer to another quarter here.

If a Die is wanting that may also be procured here with the necessary implements for working the same. In that case proper drawings must be furnished but I think it would not be so provident to have the execution here.

As it will be a ready money article upon the delivery of the metal the Cash or good Bills at 2 ms a (vise) should be provided and if the proposal be accepted I wish to know your opinion how much may be wanted.

May your most valuable life be preserved to Nestorian age or as long as you can be happy in yourself and can contribute to the felicity of mankind is the sincere wish of my Dr Sir

Y. faithful & Affect
Edwd Bridgen
Sep 17, 1779

In Franklin's handwriting on the back of the letter is a calculation of the cost:

lb	Pieces
1000	48000
cost L 58.6.8	

3. Journals of the Continental Congress, Vol. VII, p. 136.

4. American Philosophical Society Library, Vol. 47, Frame 107. This letter is classified as being dated May 2, 1778 because of unclear penmanship, but from events and from reexamination of the writing it is in the author's opinion dated May 2, 1779.

5. American Philosophical Society Library, Vol. 15, Frame 196.

Edmonde Jacques Genet wrote on Sept. 29, 1779 from Versailles to Franklin, at Passy, a letter⁶ with the package from Bridgen which contained the copper planchets to which Bridgen referred. Franklin replied to Bridgen as follows:⁷

To Mr. Bridgen, London

Passy, 2 October, 1779

Dear Sir:—I received your favor of the 17th past, and the two samples of copper are since come to hand. The metal seems to be very good, and the price reasonable, but I have not yet received the orders necessary to justify my making the purchase proposed. There has indeed been an intention to strike copper coin, that may not only be useful as small change, but serve other purposes.

Instead of repeating continually upon every half-penny the dull story that everybody knows (and what it would have been no loss to mankind if nobody had ever known), that George the Third is King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, etc., etc., to put on one side, some important proverb of Solomon, some pious moral, prudential or economical precept, the frequent inculcation of which, by seeing it every time one receives a piece of money, might make an impression upon the mind, especially of young persons, and tend to regulate the conduct: such as, on some, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; on others, Honesty is the best policy; on others, He that by the plough would thrive, himself must either hold or drive; on others, Keep thy shop, and thy shop will keep thee; on others, A penny saved is a penny got; on others, He that buys what he has no need of, will soon be forced to sell his necessities; on others, Early to bed and early to rise, will make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise; and so on, to a great variety.

The other side it was proposed to fill with good designs, drawn and engraved by the best artists in France, of all the different species of barbarity with which the English have carried on the war in America, expressing every abominable circumstance of their cruelty and inhumanity that figures can express, to make an im-

pression upon the minds of posterity as strong and durable as that on the copper. This resolution has been a long time forborne; but the late burning of defenceless towns in Connecticut, on the flimsy pretence that the people fired from behind their houses, when it is known to have been premeditated and ordered from England, will probably give the finishing provocation, and may occasion a vast demand for your metal.

I thank you for your kind wishes respecting my health. I return them most cordially fourfold unto your own bosom. Adieu,

B. Franklin

When Franklin wrote that "there has indeed been an intention to strike copper coin" he reconfirms the fact that during the American Revolution coinage discussions were taking place and that the Feb. 20, 1777 committee report had been given further consideration. Bridgen continued the correspondence as follows:⁸

Dear Sir:

The letter you favoured me with dated Oct. 2 never reached me until the 15th Currant therefore for the future I beg my letters may be addressed to Bridgen & Waller in London with a small B just under the Seal and sent under cover a *Monsieur Mons I. B. Hermans a Bureau de la poste A Anvers* and though Antwerp is a little round about they will come safe. I am vastly pleased with the motto's for the medals. Will you permit me to add one? *The safety of the State is in the Jealousy of ye People*. I don't mean these exact words but the sentiments ought to be daily inculcated. Our Worthy Friend Dr. F just called in upon me last night just as I had wrote it down and approved of it much and was greatly delighted with the Motto thoughts. I have again consulted the Workmen and and Find if a quantity can be taken off those Plates I can deliver them free on Board for Six pounds sterling p. Hundred Weight *id est* 112 lbs p Cwt Package included and I can get 8 Ton done p month. I herewith send you 2 others a little polished to show the Metal

* 6. American Philosophical Society Library, Vol. 11, Frame 175. This letter is also classified under the wrong date due to unclear penmanship. Its text definitely dates it as September 29, 1779, instead of September 29, 1778.

7. *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by Jared Sparks, p. 383; *The Numismatist*, January, 1934, Vol. XLVII, p. 29.

8. American Philosophical Society Library, Vol. 16, Frame 118.

in a Better dress the one is an ounce the other an half ounce weight and if the one was to pass for a half-penny or the 108 part of a Dollar and the other for a penny or 54th part of a Dollar they would be less liable to be counterfeited and be 33-1/3 p.ct more valuable than the English copper coin and 58 p.ct more than those coined for Virginia many years ago. in Short whether you have the size of farthings, halfpennys or Penny's, if a quantity is ordered and I have good Bills of Exchange on the delivery or Liberty to draw at 2 ms. advise when I send the Bill of Lading they shall be done to any size you advise and allways the best metal and the sooner I have the order the better However I beg to know as soon as possible or when you can guess such orders may arrive. The snake would be a good Emblem on the reverse it is already very properly in use. * * * London Novr 19, 1779

A faithful & Affect
Friend

On the back of this letter is a calculation by Franklin of the number of ounces in a hundred weight as follows:

112
16
—
672
112
—
1792

It is interesting to note that the size of the planchet for the smaller copper delivered with this letter weighed ½ ounce rather than ¼ ounce as was previously sent by Bridgen to Franklin through Genet. Bridgen's ability to calculate percentages was not too accurate as his proposed one-half ounce coin would be 43¼% more valuable than the English halfpenny (46 weighing one pound) and 87½% more valuable than the Virginia half penny (60 weighing one pound).

On the back of a letter dated Sept. 13, 1783 from Bridgen to Franklin is an indication of Franklin's deep interest in the profit made

by the English in coining copper. A portion of those notations read:

Silver 5/ p. #)
Copper 15 d p. #) Sterl.

3 Eng. half pence weigh an ounce, then 48 make a lb. worth 2/ as money which is 9 d more than its worth as Copper Disk Coinage. Near 60 p. cent Profit.

When Franklin, acting pursuant to orders of Congress, spent 100 guineas in 1779 for preparing dies to strike a medal for the heroism of Count Fleury in the Stony Point engagement he was shocked by such wastefulness. Shortly thereafter he wrote an essay entitled "Thoughts Concerning Medals"⁹ in which he said:

Copper Coins are wanting in America for small change. We have none but those of the King of England. After one Silver or Gold Medal is struck from the Dies, for the Person to be honour'd, they may be usefully employed in striking Copper money, or in some Cases small Silver.

Franklin continued to promote his mottoes for copper coinage when, on Dec. 24, 1782, he sent a note from Passy, France to Robert R. Livingston in Philadelphia, enclosing a copy of his Oct. 2, 1779 letter to Bridgen. This note stated:¹⁰

The commissioners have joined in a letter to you, recommending the consideration of a proposal from Mr. Bridgen relating to copper coin. With this you have a copy of that proposal and a sample of the copper. If it should be accepted I conceive the weight and value of the pieces (charge of coinage deducted) should be such that they be aliquot parts of a Spanish dollar. By the copy enclosed of an old letter of mine to Mr. Bridgen you will see the ideas I had of the additional utility such a coinage might be of in communicating instruction.

Bridgen persisted over a period of many years in his desire to strike coin for the United States, constantly urging Franklin to help

9. *The Numismatist*, April, 1936, Vol. XLIX, p. 258.

10. *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*, edited by Francis Wharton, Vol. VI, p. 163.

him.¹¹ Bridgen was proud to state "it is an object of my ambition to furnish the States with the hand-somest and best Copper Coin in any Nation in the known World."¹²

Unfortunately for Bridgen and for American numismatists none of the Franklin's proposed mottoes was

used on coppers and thus our country was deprived of one of the best ways to keep the public aware of Poor Richard's philosophy. Franklin's influence was not in vain, however, as the 1787 Fugio coppers coined under authority of Congress still remind us, "Time flies, so mind your business."

11. American Philosophical Society Library:
Letter of December 21, 1782, Vol. 26, Frame 112;
Letter of September 8, 1783, Vol. 39, Frame 132;
Letter of May 11, 1784, Vol. 31, Frame 171;
Letter of August 4, 1785, Vol. 33, Frame 181;
Letter of August 2, 1786, Vol. 34, Frame 110 and 110½.
12. Undated letter written about 1786, American Philosophical Society Library, Vol. 40, Frame 124.

CALENDAR OF FUTURE NUMISMATIC EVENTS

In order that this Calendar be as complete as possible, secretaries of State or Regional Organizations should advise the General Secretary of future meetings which should be included.

Florida United Numismatists. Annual convention. Jan. 10-13, 1957. Orlando, Fla. Harper Mercer, Secretary-Treasurer, Box 1426, Clearwater, Fla.

Numismatic Association of Southern California. Second annual convention. Feb. 22-24, 1957. New Hotel Clark, Los Angeles, Calif. Earl Glen Whitehead, General Chairman, 448 S. Hill St., Los Angeles 13, Calif.; Harold F. Donald, Secretary, 19221 Oxnard St., Tarzana, Calif.

Nebraska Numismatic Association. Second annual convention. March 30-31, 1957. Fontenelle, Omaha, Neb. Kenneth S. Dorr, President, 2513 S. 46th Ave., Omaha 6, Neb.

Central States Numismatic Society. Fifteenth annual convention. April 26-28, 1957. Hotel Statler, St. Louis, Mo. James A. Berkel, General Chairman, 3828 N. Park Dr., Belleville, Ill. Earl C. Brown, Secretary, 7005 S. Normal Ave., Chicago 21, Ill.

National Coin Week, May 6-12, 1957. Gene N. Nichols, General Chairman, P. O. Box 325, Balboa Island, Calif.

Empire State Numismatic Association. Spring convention. May 10-12, 1957. Sheraton Hotel, Rochester, N. Y. Jacob Cheris, Secretary, 214 State St., Albany 6, N. Y.

Pacific Northwest Numismatic Association. Fourteenth annual convention, May 24-26, 1957, Multnomah Hotel, Portland, Ore. William N. Worth, General Chairman, 2146 N. Blandena St., Portland 11, Ore.

Oklahoma-Kansas Numismatic Association. Tenth annual convention. Oct. 11-12-13, 1957. Hotel Tulsa, Tulsa, Okla. W. H. Elliott, President, 1907 E. 13th Place, Tulsa 4, Okla.

American Numismatic Association. Sixty-sixth annual convention. Aug. 21-24, 1957. Sheraton Hotel, Philadelphia, Pa. Arthur Sipe, General Chairman, 4021 Bonsall Ave., Drexel Hill, Pa.

American Numismatic Association. Sixty-seventh annual convention. Aug. 11-16, 1958. Hotel Statler, Los Angeles, Calif. Earl Glen Whitehead, Chairman, 1318 Pershing Square Bldg., Los Angeles 13, Calif.

American Numismatic Association. Sixty-eighth annual convention. Aug. 25-29, 1959. Multnomah Hotel, Portland, Oregon.